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ABSTRACT

Of the 110 public high schools in New York City, 11 are alternative high schools serving students who have been identified as "high risk," particularly dropouts and potential dropouts, as well as students who would benefit from learning environments and options not offered in comprehensive high schools. In 1984, the Curriculum Consolidation Program was implemented at these schools. To enable staff to review alternative high school curriculum in order to identify exemplary programs, the program coordinator set up an alternative high school conference, interschool informational workshops, and seminars that focused on curriculum and staff development. Staff developed or adapted curricula which encouraged active student participation. The coordinator compiled a curriculum guide containing descriptions of available curricula and distributed it to all alternative schools. While most of the curricula were developed by teachers from a single school, several were products of interschool efforts. All seminar meetings served as a form of staff development. In addition, staff from four schools worked in discrete staff development projects. In its one semester of operation, this project has begun a process that is likely to have an important positive effect on alternative school students. It is recommended that: (1) the curriculum guide be distributed to the traditional high schools; (2) conferences be planned for an entire day to allow adequate time for workshop participation; and (3) a longitudinal study be developed to tally the number of requests for various curricula, assess rates of implementation of the new curricula, and survey qualitative responses of staff and student users. (Author/KH)

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Chapter I/P.S.E.N.
Curriculum Consolidation in
Alternative High Schools
1983-84

OEA Evaluation Report

UD 024483

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

PROJECT NUMBERS: 5001- 56 - 45409

Chapter I/P.S.E.N.
Curriculum Consolidation in
Alternative High Schools
1983-84

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SUMMARY

The Curriculum Consolidation Program was implemented during spring, 1984 in the 11 alternative public high schools in New York City. To enable staff at these schools to review alternative high school curriculum to identify exemplary programs, the program coordinator set up an alternative high school conference, interschool informational workshops, and seminars that focused on curriculum and staff development. Staff developed or adapted curricula which encouraged active student participation. The coordinator compiled a curriculum guide containing descriptions of available curricula and distributed it to all alternative schools. While most of the curricula were developed by teachers from a single school, several were products of interschool efforts. All seminar meetings served as a form of staff development. In addition, staff from four schools worked in discrete staff development projects.

In its one semester of operation, this project has begun a process that is likely to have an important positive effect on alternative school students. The recommendations included in the evaluation are:

- The curriculum guide be distributed to the traditional high schools.
- Conferences be planned for an entire day to allow adequate time for workshop participation.
- A longitudinal study be developed to: tally the number of requests for various curricula, assess rates of implementation of the new curricula; and survey qualitative responses of staff and student users.

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I. PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Of the 110 public high schools in New York City, 11 are alternative high schools serving students who have been identified as "high risk" students, particularly drop-outs and potential drop-outs, as well as students who would benefit from learning environments and options not offered in comprehensive high schools.* In the 1983-84 school year, forty-five hundred students attended these schools, which ranged in size from 200 to over 700 students. Each school is autonomous with regard to admissions policy. A given school might be heavily attended by students for whom English is a second language, by older, often non-literate drop-outs, or by gifted and talented students who fared poorly in traditional high school settings. While students must meet standard diploma requirements, each school has autonomy in developing its own approach to instructional methods and curriculum development.

Overall, the alternative high schools have been successful. A recent study by the New York City Public Education Association showed that alternative high school students, most of them drop-outs or expelled from other high schools, complete 60 percent more credits a semester than they were able to complete in their previous high schools. Absentee rates are 40 percent lower than the city-wide average for comprehensive high schools (Toward School Improvement: Lessons from Alternative High Schools, New York City Public Education Association, 1982).

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* The 11 schools are Bronx Regional High School, City-As-School, Concord High School, Lower East Side Prep, Middle College High School, Pacific High School, Park East High School, High School Redirection, Satellite, Street Academy, and West Side High School.

In March, 1983 a Supervising Principal of Alternative Education was appointed to provide a coordinating mechanism for the alternative schools and to encourage curriculum development. Previously, little communication and collaboration had existed among these schools. With the number of teaching staff ranging from 10 to 21, many alternative schools have only a single teacher of a given subject. As a result, the type of dialogue about instructional methods and curriculum development which takes place in the departments of comprehensive high schools is not as likely to occur in alternative schools (Toward School Improvement: Lessons from Alternative High Schools, New York City Public Education Association, 1982).

OBJECTIVES

Initially, three project objectives were proposed:

1. to review alternative high school curriculum to identify exemplary programs;
2. to prepare and distribute a system-wide report on successful teaching strategies for high-risk students;
3. to develop and analyze data on pupil achievement.

Although conceived as a year-long project, it was funded by a New York State Incentive Grant to Improve Pupil Performance for a six-month period. As a result of this time constraint, project staff focused on the first objective and made its priority the development of new approaches to curriculum development and alternative instructional methods. Addressing the other objectives was postponed until additional funding extended the life of the project.

SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation team concentrated its efforts on structured interviews with project staff, observations of project activities, and reviews of curriculum materials. Evaluators also made use of survey instruments which had been designed and administered by project staff to assess teachers' responses to project seminars and conferences.

II. EVALUATION FINDINGS

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

A project ccordinator who is an experienced alternative high school teacher was hired to implement the project. The coordinator met with the principal of each alternative school and attended staff meetings to assess their needs and to introduce the project to administrative and teaching staff. Subsequently, interschool seminars based on interest in a common area of curriculum development were formed. The coordinator also organized a workshop series and a first annual alternative schools conference. Project activities also included distribution of a newsletter. The grant provided per session funds for school staff to participate in the project.

Workshops

Convened after school during the week and on Saturdays, informational workshops were organized by the coordinator and attended by teachers and school administrative staff. The evaluation team observed the Job and Career Development Workshops, which featured speakers from Open Doors, the Job Corps, and the Training Opportunities Project (TOPS). This workshop drew 10 participants representing eight alternative schools. Each presentation was followed by a lively question and answer session, as well as by less formal interchanges on related issues.

Alternative High Schools Conference

With the assistance of volunteer coordinators from the alternative schools, a First Annual Conference of Alternative High School Personnel was held on May 22, 1984 at City-as-School. It provided an opportunity for a

wide spectrum of alternative school staff to meet and to participate in workshops on such topics as career options, competency exams, the alternative classroom, holding power, counseling, and non-classroom personnel. It was attended by 250 people.

The conference began with a "get acquainted" hour and speeches by Chancellor Nathan Quinones and Superintendent Stephen E. Phillips. Participants could then select two workshops to attend; originally scheduled for 45 minutes each, workshops were cut to 30 minutes apiece because of time constraints. The conference ended wih another networking opportunity.

Seminars

Seminars drew together members from all of the alternative schools on the basis of common interest. Like the workshops, seminars met after school and on Saturdays. Whereas each workshop met only once and was primarily informational, the seminars were ongoing and involved participants actively in evaluating curriculum, assessing student needs, exploring pedagogical issues, and developing new materials. Some groups developed curriculum material, others focused on such new instructional methods as interdisciplinary block programming, and still others considered such issues of educational philosophy as "how alternative is our school at this time?" The two major efforts were curriculum development and staff development.

Curriculum Development

Curricula ranged widely in topic and in approach, but were unified by a shared attitude toward alternative instruction: students were to be involved in some form of active participation. One approach to getting students

actively involved in the learning process is illustrated in the extensive women's studies curriculum put together in manual form by teachers from five schools; curricula developed by seminar participants were packaged together with a broadly-researched array of previously developed materials. Lesson plans include "discussion motivators" utilizing such diverse materials as case studies, a role-reversal role play, and an early-childhood inventory of students' own experiences. Another component provides students with a checklist with which to assess their own textbooks for sexist attitudes, imagery, and language. Questionnaires for self-assessment of attitudes about role-related behavior in various situations also provide learning through participation. The External Learning Experience Packets were also designed to give students active experiences supportive to learning. Introduction to Journalism, for example, gives the student experience with "the journalistic and administrative skills needed to regularly turn out a weekly community newspaper." Packets were also prepared in culinary arts, business administration, legal studies, and public relations and publicity.

At the end of the semester, the project coordinator compiled a curriculum guide containing descriptions of curricula available from alternative schools staff. It has been distributed to all of the alternative schools. Put together in a looseleaf binder so that future curricula can be added, the guide contains both curricula developed under the grant and those done individually or in groups which made their work available to the project. Material like the independent study packets were adapted to the needs of alternative school students from packets developed and used at John Dewey High School. While most of the curricula were developed by teachers from a single school, several, like the computer literacy curriculum on which staff

from three schools collaborated, were the products of interschool efforts. The curriculum guide contains a rationale for each curriculum, a description of the process used in developing it, an indication of the expected student outcome, and the contact person responsible for distributing copies of each curriculum to other educators.

In addition to curricula already mentioned, the following curricula have been developed or adapted:

- Vocational Internship Program (an articulation of academic instruction and supervised work experience)
- STAR Program (intensive reading/writing/language arts integrating academic and guidance functions)
- Project Bridge (a block program approach to English language instruction for E.S.L. students)
- Project Bridge: Word Processing Component
- Mini-Course on Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Videotaping Curriculum (methods of using video throughout disciplines and a basic curriculum for a video class)
- Computer Lessons with Business Orientation
- Advisor Group Curriculum
- Short Story/Film Class
- Bongo Theater Traveling Herd (Interdisciplinary Block Programming integrating human development, career development, theater, and English)
- Gifted and Talented Curriculum
- Basic Medical Assistant Program
- Microbiology/Medical Careers
- The Inquiry Demonstration Project and the Study of Shakespeare
- E.S.L. Curriculum (a five-term curriculum)

Staff Development

Although not its primary purpose, all work done on curriculum served as a means of staff development. Interactions between staff members at different schools allowed for a sharing of skills and information. Staff from four schools also worked on discrete staff development projects which grew out of their own needs:

- Park East Staff Development (development of guidance and career orientation through adviser groups by every staff member)

- Curriculum in Executive Internship (determination of the structure of career area prototypes that will be written in subsequent sessions)

- City-as-School In-House Curriculum (development of curricula for five courses through planning teams, individual writing sessions, and team evaluation sessions)

- Examination of Curriculum at West Side High School (formation of teams of teachers to develop curriculum in specific areas; improvement of ways of working together, especially in relation to curriculum development)

- Student Assessment at West Side High School (analysis of individual student attendance patterns, credit accumulation pattern, particular problems, reasons for success or failure at West Side)

- Concord High School Staff Development (development of the role of teacher counselor)

III. PROJECT OUTCOMES

Staff response to the February through June series of seminars and workshops has been extremely positive. Evaluative comments on the seven-question staff survey ranged from "very well" to "excellent." Responses indicate that participants felt the project had helped keep them informed about developments in other alternative schools. Teachers clearly appreciated the fact that their ideas were sought out and their creativity was encouraged.

Respondents to the questionnaire administered at the end of the conference indicated that they saw the conference as positive, but far too brief (See Table 1.) Staff welcomed the opportunity to share views about teaching, but felt that too much time was spent on introductory remarks and not enough time was spent in workshops.

Table 1
Responses to First Annual Conference Survey*
Alternative Schools

	Percentage of Favorable Responses	Percentage of Neutral Responses	Percentage of Unfavorable Responses
A. I think the information from the discussions will be most helpful to me/my school.	76%	17%	7%
B. The length of time for the whole conference was adequate.	36	9	55
C. The length of time for the discussions was adequate.	34	10	56
D. Having workshops with panel members from our school rather than experts from without was a good idea.	80	15	5
E. Meeting other school staff was helpfully enjoyable.	77	12	11
F. The conference was well-organized.	78	15	7
G. Attending this conference was worthwhile.	88	2	10

* Percentages are based on the responses of all participants.

- Staff found that the most important aspect of the conference was the opportunity it provided to interact with their colleagues from other schools.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In its one semester of operation, this project has begun a process that is likely to have an important positive effect on alternative school students. The evaluation team regards the curriculum guide, the curricula, and staff development materials as exemplary responses to the requirements of creative alternative education. The concrete projects -- the manual and the curricula -- reflect the enthusiasm of these responses. The decision to pay on a per session basis for staff participation in the project reinforced the sense that this work is important and staff time is valuable. The interchanges among school staff between and within schools which this project has encouraged form a solid basis for further collaborative work.

The evaluation team makes the following recommendations:

1. The curriculum guide should be distributed to the traditional high schools.

2. Conferences should be planned for an entire day to allow adequate time for workshop participation.

3. A longitudinal study should be developed to tally the number of requests for various curricula; assess rates of implementation of the new curricula; and survey qualitative responses of staff and student users.

4. The originally proposed longitudinal study to determine changes in pupil performance should be developed and implemented.

5. Based on the success of the project in the participating schools, the project should be extended to other alternative settings, such as Teen Outreach and Riker's Island.